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LEAVES FROM THE NOTE-BOOK OF A PERIPATETIC
PHILOSOPHER OF WESTMINSTER.

(*The Peripatetic philosophiseth upon Livery Servants, and such like cattle.*)

Tom.—“I say, Jack, what’s the meenin’ of them there taxes, what the poor people does be so clamoursome about?”

Jack.—“Ang, me, Tom if I can tell, but I’ze woundy thirsty a’ter that ere salt beef as we took for snack, that I knows; wilt turn in an’ take a draught o’ summat, an’ we’ll have a snooze till Jim rings the second bell for dinner.”

Dialogue between two livery servants.

In my perambulations along the side of Saint James’s Square to day, about five of the clock, I observed upon the steps of a nobleman’s house, seven men servants, part of the “establishment” of the family, waiting in yawning and listless idleness, for I know not what. Fat well appointed varlets they were, with powder in their hair, and silk stockings on their legs, their hands in their breeches pockets, and looking down from the steps upon every poor peripatetic like myself, as if they had a very especial contempt for all who walked. I grasped my horn-tipped staff the faster, and out of this, fell into a train of reflection upon the way in which the great people of this good city of Westminster order their household affairs; and by the time I had crossed Pall Mall, into the park, and arrived in the area opposite the Horse Guards, I had meditated what here followeth for the public edification. The ‘establishments’ of the nobility, and first rate gentry who inhabit Westminster, are exceeding great and sore evils under the sun. Their masters and mistresses know little or nothing about them, except that they cost so much money—it is proper that the servants should look sleek, even as the coach horses do, and that they should come and go, as their presence or absence is required, and that there should be plenty of them to make a show, and all this happens, and the house steward pays their wages, and the bills for what they eat, (an enormous matter,) and they are furnished with fine clothes, and there’s an end. But there is no thought, as in the olden time, of looking after the ordering of this family of domestics—there is no thought of any other connection between master and servant, than that of the hirer and the hired. No assembling of themselves together daily, or weekly, to join in family prayers, as in the good old days, when I was young; no solicitude, in short, on either side for the real welfare of the other. If it were not to endanger a good place, the servant would just as soon stand behind the coach at his master’s funeral, as at his wedding, because he knows full well, that were he to fall from the back of the said coach, and break his collar-bone, his said master, if he noticed the matter at all, would only damn his awkwardness, and desire him to be taken to some place, and he would pay the expense.

This “paying of the expense,” stands in place of every thing in this country that used to be deemed worthy of praise and honor. The meanest scoundrel that ever sneaked out of a course of combined cringing and fraud, by which he has gained money, if he but “pay the expense,” will find more attention, more respect, more “suit and service,” than if, lacking the one thing needful, he had the wisdom of Solomon, the magnanimity of Scipio, and the mildness and piety of that illustrious Hollander Schwarzhurd, whom English churchmen call Philip Melancthon, and Italian ecclesiastics Ippofilo di Terra Nera.

But this is rather beside the present matter—servants who live, as servants in great houses in town do live now-a-days, have no aim but gain, no better ambition than that of continuing to eat and drink well, to lodge well, and to do very little.

They form, generally, a considerable company of both sexes in each house; all of them fed to the throat—many of them in the habit of consuming plenty of inflaming liquors; and most of them with abundance of that idleness, which so much encourages the sensual appetites, when the mental faculties are so dark and benumbed, and stupified, as is commonly the case with full-fed menials. Thus all manner of rank dispositions grow up amongst them, like fat weeds, and, habituated to every animal gratification, they become insolent as they are idle, inso-much, that no where are there to be found such contemptners of “honest poverty,” as in the servants’ hall of a great house.

None but those who have lived a good while in London, can form a notion of the vast number of this idle and luxurious class—“they are as grass-hoppers for multitude;” but unlike that active little insect in every other particular, for they are often huge, and slow of motion, and swollen and moist, with too much food and rest.

There are innumerable quiet streets at the west end of the town, branching off from the great squares—streets of immense length, and monstrous regularity of appearance, where each individual house has a certain modest unpretending air; yet if you walk along them between five and six in the evening, you may see, peeping out from the narrow windows that flank the hall doors of every house, some two or three servants in livery, kicking their heels till their masters come home to dinner.

I heard a man once suggest a “review” of the livery servants of London, in Hyde-park; but it was objected to him that Hyde-park would not hold them, and that it might be dangerous that so vast a body, held together by the tie of a common occupation, should know the extent of their own numbers.

When we think of the miserable condition of the labourers, both agricultural and manufacturing, who are scattered over the country—how hard they work, and how they are pinched for the means of the coarsest support, it is a grief to contemplate this mass of people, one third of whom do not earn their bread by any sort of work; maintained for purposes of mere show and extravagant luxury, by those who are, many of them, enabled to keep up that luxury by means of the taxes levied from the people at large. It is curious, however, and full of instruction, to observe how the law of opinion corrects the caprices of fortune, and renders society, like nature, a system of equivalents. These knights of the shoulder-knot, with all their privileges and immunities, are scorned by every other class with a perfect scorn: even the rudest hind that tills the field, “the maid that milks and does the meanest chars,” all in short who earn their bread by any honest calling, however lowly or obscure, look down upon the “saucepan” as the scum of the earth, the meanest and most worthless of mankind.